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SUBJECT: THE SHI'A COALITION: FADHILA'S WITHDRAWAL
UNDERSCORES LACK OF UNITY

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Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Fadhila's March 7 withdrawal from the Shi'a coalition (UIC) underscores the lack of cohesiveness in the UIC.

Encompassing a spectrum of Shi'a Islamist parties and individuals that banded together to contest the December 2005 national election, the UIC has shown signs of strain since the days of government formation. These strains partly reflect personal rivalries or animosities between leaders and partly diverging political views. In the Council of Representatives (CoR), the UIC has not functioned as a single bloc. The Sadrists and Fadhila have often opposed SCIRI-driven initiatives, while Dawa has played more of an intermediary role. Outside the CoR, UIC constituent parties and individuals have also explored various formal alliances that cross ethnic and sectarian lines.

12. (C) Because the UIC's constituent parties have not acted cohesively, the practical impact of Fadhila's withdrawal in the CoR will be small. A more important question is whether it represents the breaking of a psychological barrier, opening the door to further formal defections from the UIC and perhaps its dissolution. While it is hard to see the UIC holding together formally for the remainder of the CoR's four year term, we cannot predict when further defections might happen. The next provincial elections will likely prove a defining moment in the evolution of the Shi'a Islamist parties and the UIC more generally. We expect the UIC's constituent parties to compete against each other in these elections, although this competition will not necessarily signal the end of the UIC at the national level. End summary.

Government Formation Reveals Rifts

13. (C) The UIC was formed in October 2005 by Shi'a Islamist leaders to compete in the December 2005 national elections as list 555. A similar coalition competed in the January 2005 national elections as list 169, with one significant difference being that the December 2005 coalition included the Sadrists. The UIC won 128 seats in Iraq's 275-member CoR. By pre-arrangement, it divided the 128 seats among 7 entities as follows: 28 seats to Sadrists; 15 seats each to SCIRI, Badr, Fadhila, and Dawa Tanzim; 12 seats to Dawa; and 30 seats to "Independents," some representing small political parties who hitched their wagon to the UIC and others prominent but non-aligned Shi'a politicians. (Note: One

Dawa contact told us that Dawa agreed to give the Sadrists 3 seats after the Sadrists threatened to back out of the coalition. End note.) Constitutionally granted the right to nominate a candidate for Prime Minister, the UIC eventually chose Dawa member Nuri al-Maliki after fellow Dawa nominee Ibrahim Ja'fari, who edged out SCIRI's Adel Abdel Mehdi, was unable to form a government. After prolonged negotiations within the UIC and with other blocs, al-Maliki formed a cabinet in which all UIC groups except Fadhila were represented.

SCIRI/Badr: The UIC's Dominant Player

¶4. (S) Despite Abdel Mehdi's failure to win the nomination for Prime Minister, SCIRI, with its Badr affiliate, is the dominant player in the Shi'a coalition. Abdulaziz al-Hakim, SCIRI's chairman, is officially the head of the coalition, and SCIRI and Badr enjoy a cadre of seasoned leaders at the national and provincial levels. The party receives considerable financing from Iran and has well developed security, media, and charitable branches. SCIRI demonstrated its political power most clearly during passage of the regions formation law, which would allow for a nine-province region in the Shi'a-dominated provinces south of Baghdad (ref D). Yet the process also showed the limits of SCIRI's power in the CoR; even with Kurdish support, SCIRI had to make several important concessions to win enough additional support to ensure the law's passage. It also confirmed the rifts within the UIC, as Fadhila and the Sadrists opposed SCIRI's position and boycotted the vote.

¶5. (C) While SCIRI has the strongest organization of any of

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the Shi'a Islamist parties, it has not been fully tested by the Shi'a electorate. It ran on its own ticket only in four provinces in the January 2005 provincial elections, receiving less than 20 percent of the vote in Dhi Qar and Muthanna and about 35 percent in Najaf and Karbala. SCIRI's deep ties to Iran are sure to be challenged by Shi'a rivals if SCIRI runs alone in the next provincial elections.

Dawa and Dawa Tanzim: Personality over Party?

¶6. (C) Dawa enjoys the legitimacy of being Iraq's first Shi'a Islamist party, but it has been prone to splintering; Dawa Tanzim is one of the more recent offshoots. Dawa's members claim that Dawa is the most internally "democratic" of any of the UIC's parties, but it has not held internal elections since the fall of the Saddam regime. The stated reason for this delay is that the security situation "does not permit," but the underlying reason is likely that competition between its principal leaders, including Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, UIC deputy chairman Ali al-Adeeb, and former PM Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, might drive the party to splinter further. Dawa's lack of support for Maliki on the "moderate front" is a clear indication of this competition.

¶7. (C) Dawa derives its political strength, therefore, not from its organization but from the stature of its leaders and their ability to intercede between SCIRI and the Sadrists. Maliki gained the UIC nomination for PM because he was acceptable to both SCIRI and the Sadrists, which together control close to half of the seats in the Shi'a coalition. While SCIRI seemed indifferent to the Sadrists' temporary withdrawal from the CoR, Dawa and Dawa Tanzim leaders actively negotiated with Sadr and his lieutenants for their return. Although Maliki will say that he does not need or even have the Sadrists' support, he knows that the more he alienates the Sadrists, the more dependent he will be on SCIRI support for his initiatives.

¶18. (C) The Embassy's political contact with national Sadrists leaders is extremely limited, so we must rely on their actions, and on the evaluations of others, to understand them. Until their temporary withdrawal from the government starting in late November 2006, the Sadrists in CoR had a one-issue platform: "end the occupation." They used every possible opportunity, including the vote on the regions formation law, to condemn coalition presence. Having gained three service ministries (health, transportation, and agriculture), the Sadrists by all accounts used these ministries as fiefdoms for patronage. The Sadrists have done little to build alliances with other groups in the CoR, including parties within the UIC, and as a result may have miscalculated in their temporary withdrawal. While elements of the UIC, particularly Dawa and some of the independents, urged the Sadrists to return to the CoR, they did not offer the Sadrists any significant political concessions (ref C).

¶19. (C) One Dawa leader described the change in the Sadrists' attitude upon their return to the CoR as "dramatic," and, outwardly, he is right. The Sadrists appear to be in retreat. Since their return, they have not used the CoR as a bully pulpit, they have expressed support for the Baghdad Security Plan (BSP), and several of their CoR members have made tentative overtures to IIP and the Kurds. Overt Jaysh al-Mahdi presence in Baghdad appears considerably reduced. It remains to be seen whether these changes represent a new willingness to work within the confines of Iraq's political system and support the Maliki government, or are rather part of a tactical move designed to deflect unwanted attention as the BSP progresses.

¶10. (C) Although their CoR members have acted relatively cohesively, the Sadrists' organization at a national level is not as strong as SCIRI's. With the exception of Muqtada, their leadership structure is unclear and appears prone to change. They lack strong parliamentary leaders comparable to SCIRI/Badr's Humam Hamoudi, Jalal al-Sin al-Saghir, and Hadi al Amri. According to non-Sadrist Shi'a contacts, many Sadrist CoR members disagreed with Sadr's order to temporarily withdraw from CoR but could not oppose it. Sadr appears to have wide popular support among poorer Shi'a in the Shi'a-majority provinces thanks to his father's legacy and his populist rhetoric, but the Sadrists' weak organizational structure may limit their ability to capitalize on this popularity at the polls.

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Fadhila: Going, Going, Gone

¶11. (C) Never comfortable in the UIC, Fadhila announced its withdrawal on March 7 (ref A). Its leaders say it joined the coalition because of extreme pressure from the marja'iya, and that it participated in the UIC "in appearance only." Fadhila leaders are clearly wary of SCIRI's power and distrustful of SCIRI's federalist agenda and Iranian connections. While Fadhila and the Sadrists both sprang from Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr's movement, share a distrust of SCIRI, and boycotted the vote on the regions formation law, they have not worked closely together at a national level. Instead, even before its withdrawal from the UIC, Fadhila had been actively exploring alliances with Sunni parties to advance its vision of Iraqi nationalism (ref B). Fadhila seeks a stronger central government and supports amending the constitution to affirm Iraq's "Arab" identity and strengthen the role of Islam, all points of agreement with Sunni parties. While some within the UIC consider Fadhila's withdrawal a negotiating tactic in its quest for a ministry, it certainly also reflects Fadhila's distinct political

vision and its marginalization within the UIC. Fadhila is strongest in the southern provinces and weakest in Najaf and Karbala.

Fadhila's Withdrawal: Potential Impact on the UIC

¶12. (C) Because the UIC is not a cohesive entity and because Fadhila often took its own positions on important legislation, the practical impact of Fadhila's withdrawal at the CoR will be minor. The more important question is whether it represents the breaking of a psychological barrier and will open the door to other defections from the UIC. In its withdrawal announcement, Fadhila challenged the very basis of the UIC, stating that coalitions based on sectarian affiliation would not help Iraq overcome sectarian violence.

¶13. (C) Given the personal rivalries and differences in vision within the UIC, particularly between SCIRI and the Sadrists, many Mission contacts believe that its dissolution is only a "matter of time," as one of them put it. But opinions vary as to how long it will take and as to whether Fadhila's withdrawal will speed the process. Contacts who are more independent-minded believe that Fadhila's withdrawal is a positive step that will cause others in the UIC to consider more seriously new coalitions that are based on political vision rather than sect. One of Vice President Abdel Mehdi's more Western-leaning advisors, for example, said that he believed it would give SCIRI more freedom to pursue the "moderate front" and claimed that the Vice President shared his view. However several SCIRI politicians downplayed the significance of the withdrawal, arguing that it was merely part of an attempt by Fadhila to gain a ministry or suggesting that Fadhila received money from Arab sources in return for its move. One Dawa member told us recently that "the Shi'a are not ready for the coalition to be dissolved."

¶14. (C) We see the potential for several scenarios over the coming months. First, Fadhila could return to the UIC because of pressure (e.g., from the marja'iya) or because of a ministerial offer it cannot refuse. We do not discount this possibility, but we think it likely that Fadhila's withdrawal will hold. Several contacts have told us that the marja'iya will not intervene, and Fadhila's bloc leader assured us the withdrawal was final. Second, Fadhila's withdrawal could spur other groups to break from or, at the least, diminish their ties to the UIC. SCIRI could join a "moderate front," for example, the Sadrists could break away entirely, or various independents could join other potential coalitions. Finally, the UIC could continue to function in the way it has, a coalition formed to look after Shi'a interests where SCIRI and the Sadrists contain each other and where Dawa gains leverage as an intermediary between them.

Provincial Elections: Upcoming Test of Strength

¶15. (C) Although the UIC may continue as a national-level institution, we expect that its remaining constituent parties will compete against each other in upcoming provincial elections (unscheduled as yet but potentially to take place in 2007). As befits its organizational strength, SCIRI/Badr is already gearing up for its run through formation of a strategy committee in Baghdad. The elections will test whether Dawa can maintain unity and organize itself effectively across provinces. The elections will also test the depth of appeal of the Sadrists and whether they are able

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to mount a cohesive campaign. Finally, the elections will test the appeal of the Shi'a Islamist parties as a whole in the Shi'a-majority provinces, as voter frustration with their governance, and perhaps with sectarianism, may provide an

opening for moderate leaders and parties not aligned with the Shi'a Islamists. By its withdrawal from the UIC, Fadhila is clearly positioning itself to take advantage of this frustration.

¶16. (C) While it is possible that Sistani will ask UIC parties to run together on a single ticket, we believe it more likely that he will stress the importance of avoiding intra-Shi'a violence during the campaign and election. Several moderate, non-aligned political figures in the southern and central provinces have approached our PRTs and REO Basrah expressing their concerns about political violence and intimidation. The extent to which the militias affiliated with the Shi'a Islamist parties refrain from violence and intimidation will be a crucial indicator for Iraq's democratic future.

SPECKHARD